

Eastern Polynesia—Introduction



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AT THE END OF NOVEMBER 2000, a group of 25 archaeologists convened at the Richard Gump Research Station of the University of California, Berkeley, for an international conference on "The Archaeology of Eastern Polynesia: Retrospect and Prospect." The conference was co-organized by us, with financial support from the France-Berkeley Fund of the University of California, and from the Ministry of Culture, Territory of French Polynesia.¹ The participants were a truly international group, with representatives from Australia, Chile, France, French Polynesia, Hawai'i, New Caledonia, New Zealand, and the continental United States. Over the course of a week, in the relaxed setting of the Gump Station, situated on the shores of Cook's Bay, Mo'orea Island, the conferees presented a series of papers reviewing past and present work throughout various islands and archipelagoes of Eastern Polynesia, and engaged in stimulating discussions of current theoretical and methodological issues. This issue of *Asian Perspectives* offers revised versions of seven papers presented at the Mo'orea conference, largely focusing on the results of new and often cutting-edge research in Eastern Polynesia.

The nature of early Eastern Polynesian voyaging and interaction spheres has been a topic of considerable debate and discussion in recent years, in part stimulated by advances in geochemical sourcing of basalt artifacts, allowing archaeologists to track inter-island and inter-archipelago exchanges through direct material evidence. In his paper, Barry Rolett considers the processes that may have led to a subsequent decline in such voyaging after about A.D. 1450.

Fishing is another aspect of Eastern Polynesian prehistory with a long history of archaeological research, originally centered on the analysis of fishhooks and other fishing gear, and later expanded to include zooarchaeological analyses of fishbone assemblages. In her contribution, Melinda Allen builds upon these traditional approaches with the application of new methods such as sequencing of mtDNA from archaeological fishbones to develop fine-grained identifications. In particular, she examines a model of resource depression with respect to certain fish faunal assemblages from the Cook Islands.

The Mangareva group of islands was one of the first to be investigated by modern archaeological techniques, in 1959 by Roger Green. Reanalyzing the

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materials uncovered in that pioneering study, Green and Weisler have produced a new culture-historical sequence for Mangareva, which they then proceed to integrate with Weisler's more recent work on the Pitcairn and Henderson Islands to the east. Bringing in as well considerations from historical linguistics, Green and Weisler argue that Mangareva was probably first settled ca. A.D. 700–800, and played a key role in the geographic expansion of Polynesians into the southeastern parts of the triangle.

As readers familiar with recent debates in Polynesian prehistory will be aware, one of the most contentious issues has centered around the timing of early settlement—the so-called “long vs. short chronology” debate. Critical to resolving this debate are good series of well-controlled radiocarbon dates from key sites. In their paper, Atholl Anderson and Yosihiko Sinoto report new series of ^{14}C dates from two sites that have been claimed by Sinoto to represent an early phase of settlement: the Vaito'otia-Fa'ahia site in the Society Islands, and the Hane site on Ua Huka in the Marquesas. Their new results do not definitively resolve the chronology debate, but certainly add weight to the late settlement hypothesis.

The Marquesas Islands have been a key locality in Eastern Polynesian research ever since the pioneering excavations of Robert Suggs on Nuku Hiva, followed by Sinoto's arguments for the archipelago as a center of dispersal. Over the past decade, Eric Conte and his students have continued this tradition of research by focusing on the island of Ua Huka. In his contribution, Conte reviews the main objectives and some results of his long-term research program on the island.

Indigenous agricultural systems in Eastern Polynesia were the subject of some ethnographic studies in the earlier half of the twentieth century (e.g., the work of E.S.C. Handy in Hawai'i, or that of Forest Brown in the Marquesas), but widespread economic changes such as cash cropping of copra or vanilla have largely been assumed to have radically altered these systems. Turning to the most isolated of the Society Islands, however, Hinanui Cauchois carried out a new ethnoarchaeological study of dryland horticultural practices on Maupiti. Her original contribution to the ethnoecological literature on Eastern Polynesian horticulture demonstrates that there is still much to be learned from fieldwork with indigenous Polynesian gardeners.

Finally, in a short paper that was explicitly designed to stimulate discussion at the conference, Christophe Sand takes a new look at the classic ethnographic division between Melanesia and Polynesia—especially the model presented some years ago by Marshall Sahlins—from a fresh archaeological perspective. His paper is not intended to be a comprehensive examination of the problem, but rather offers a perspective from one who has worked intensively in parts of Melanesia (especially New Caledonia and the Loyalty Islands). Paralleling the views of some contemporary anthropologists (such as Bronwyn Douglas or Nick Thomas), Sand finds that the distinction between Melanesian “tribes” and Polynesian “chiefdoms” simply does not stand up to the accumulated archaeological evidence for high levels of complexity in both parts of Oceania.

In sum, the seven papers presented in this issue of *Asian Perspectives* touch upon a number of key issues in Eastern Polynesian archaeology and prehistory. They

demonstrate that Eastern Polynesia continues to be a focus of lively and stimulating research within the broader Oceanic region.

NOTE

1. We take this occasion to thank both the Minister of Culture, Louise Peltzer, for her interest in and support of the conference, and Dr. Neil Davies, manager of the Richard Gump Research Station who assisted and facilitated our meeting in a variety of ways.